# THE LAST TACTICAL MILE

## Sustaining Defeat-ISIS Operations in Syria.

BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL TAVI BRUNSON AND MAJOR DAVID ARMESON

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## INTRODUCTION

Military logisticians understand that special operations forces conduct distributed operations far from major bases or safe havens, and that there are inherent challenges when supporting a SOF-specific mission set. Logisticians also recognize that these missions often include indigenous partner forces and the unique requirement to sustain their atypical formations. However, some SOF missions are more challenging than others, and the Defeat-ISIS mission in Syria produced lessons that will be valuable for SOF logisticians into the foreseeable future. Most notably, SOF logisticians had to find solutions for three significant challenges: 1) how to rapidly equip a new partner force and sustain operations, 2) how to provide material solutions to emerging capability gaps as the battlefield evolved, and 3) how to field a team of capable SOF logisticians on an enduring basis. These challenges were overcome through critical thinking, innovation and SOF professionals solving problems with limited resources.

## BACKGROUND

In 2013, an al-Qaeda splinter cell declared its caliphate across the Middle East as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Within a year, the organization occupied more than 34,000 square miles across the region. ISIS imposed a ruthless government that was responsible for countless murders and human rights violations. The Government of Iraq quickly mobilized its military and, with support from the United States, slowly regained terrain from ISIS. The fall of Mosul in July 2017, marked the pinnacle of a collaborative effort between the Government of Iraq and a multinational coalition, and it leveraged the full range of bases and infrastructure Iraq had to offer.

The mission to defeat ISIS in Syria was not afforded the same support from a host-nation government, and SOF teams were challenged to establish a capable and sustainable partner force. By 2013, the Syrian Arab Republic had been immersed in civil war for more than two years. The Syrian Regime's military was focused solely on the defeat of Syrian rebels, and the Kurdish population had essentially seceded from the struggling state. Further, ISIS was nearly unopposed as it declared its capital in Raqqa, the sixth largest city in Syria. Syrians opposed to ISIS rule found themselves fighting without the support of a central government, and they lacked the equipment and training necessary to mount an effective resistance.

The United States Special Operations Command organizes and trains its forces to operate in challenging and ambiguous environments, and the command set conditions to confront ISIS in Syria. In December 2014, the United States Congress provided the President with the authority and funds to overtly train and lethally equip vetted members of the Syrian Opposition. Section 1209 of the FY15 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA 1209) authorized up to $500 million from the newly established Counterterrorism Partnership fund to train and equip Syrian partner forces solely for the purpose of defeating ISIS. SOF teams established a system to recruit

01 **Equipment from the CONUS Aggregation Node (CAN) is received at a logistics node (LOGNODE) location. The CAN is the central recieving location for new equipment to be used to train and equip Syrian partner forces. SOF logistics Soldiers at the CAN ensure shipments are properly received, accounted for and tested before sending it forward to a LOGNODE location where it's tailored and distributed to meet mission needs.** U.S. ARMY PHOTO COURTESY OF 5TH SFG(A)

fighters from Syria, screen them for ties to terrorism; train them in basic combat skills; provide them with equipment; and reinsert them as members of organized resistance forces. The process of creating a Vetted Syrian Opposition was designated as the 1209 Train and Equip mission. This program marked the beginning of the US-led ground opposition against ISIS in Syria.

## EQUIPPING THE PARTNER FORCE AND SUSTAINING OPERATIONS

Equipping the vetted opposition required the establishment of a global network to support acquisition, storage and movement of NDAA 1209-authorized equipment. Initially, items were sourced from the United States because they were readily available, and conditions in Syria dictated timely procurement and delivery. USSOCOM leveraged its directorate for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics to locate and procure items. SOF teams, working with their vetted partners, quickly identified and communicated an array of critical capability gaps. In turn, SOF AT&L collaborated with the Army Materiel Command to source items available within military stocks. SOF AT&L also established a contracting mechanism for nonstandard items that required purchase outside of the Defense Department. In total, SOF AT&L procured $406 million in weapons, ammunition, vehicles, communication items and individual clothing and equipment during FY 15/16.

The decision to procure equipment from the United States meant that items would come from multiple vendors located across the country. The initial fielding concept called for direct shipment of equipment from vendors to SOF elements in theater. However, lessons learned from previous operations showed utility in consolidation, accountability and testing prior to receipt by the end-user. SOF teams in Syria requested that equipment arrive ready for employment, and that the administrative and maintenance tasks occur outside of the operational area. The request was approved, and SOF elements developed the CONUS Aggregation Node to execute these tasks.

The CONUS Aggregation Node was established on a U.S. Army installation in the spring of 2015, and the facility was operated by 25 SOF logistics Soldiers with varying functional backgrounds. The CAN included a 10,000 square foot warehouse, 55,000 square foot storage yard and four secure bunkers for ammunition. These facilities enabled SOF elements to segregate 1209 equipment from the other categories of Army materiel, and closely monitor the deliberate effort to receive, account for and test items as they arrived. In total, the CAN received more than 500 truckloads of equipment from vendors across the United States, and it accounted for more than $400 million in equipment earmarked for Syrian partner forces.

Transportation of equipment into theater also required a departure from standard logistics practices and was made possible through close coordination with strategic mission partners. The traditional employment of surface vessel shipment was not viable due to long lead-times and the requirement for additional movement from the seaport. The rapid pace of operations in Syria dictated timely delivery of requested items, and dedicated air lift was the timeliest mode of delivery. SOF logisticians at the CAN forged strong relationships with the Air Mobility Branch at the United States Transportation Command, and with its support, routed cargo aircraft directly through an airfield adjacent to the CAN. The support from USTRANSOM was vital, and it facilitated the movement of more than 1,400 pallets on 61 aircraft in the first 12 months alone – all received by SOF elements operating in Syria and its adjacent safe havens.

Executing logistics in an immature theater is difficult, and Syria initially lacked the logistics infrastructure necessary to support SOF elements. Syria, and its adjacent safe havens, were not routinely supported by the robust logistics enterprise located in the CENTCOM Area of Re-

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**Equipment staged at a LOGNODE CRSP yard. After arrival, the equipment is organized and placed on trucks for ground movement to SOF teams in Syria.** U.S. ARMY PHOTO COURTESY OF 5TH SFG(A)

sponsibility. Years of build-up in Kuwait and Iraq simplified those logistics equations as systems and structures were available in both countries. Conversely, locations around Syria had only nascent capability inherent to SOF teams and lacked the capacity for a sudden uplift in equipment. Initial flights of 1209 materiel were transported from the CAN to these locations, but airfields lacked the ability to efficiently receive, store, distribute and sometimes download equipment once it arrived. SOF elements found it necessary to develop nodes capable of managing 1209 equipment and sustaining SOF teams with standard logistics functions.

Logistics nodes, later referred to as LOGNODEs, were developed and manned by SOF support Soldiers. These nodes were geographically arrayed to best facilitate 1209 equipment distribution and tailored to meet mission requirements at each location. The LOGNODEs varied in size and were responsible for two primary tasks: 1) accountability and throughput of 1209 equipment, and 2) execution of logistics functions for SOF teams in Syria. While a total of two tasks is ostensibly under whelming, the LOGNODEs were small and each task was riddled with challenges that required critical thinking, innovation and junior leaders to solve problems with limited resources.

The effort to manage 1209 equipment came with a heightened level of scrutiny. The equipment was funded with a specific appropriation and accompanied by Congressional oversight. As a result, SOF logisticians had to develop a segregated line of supply and maintain meticulous records as items moved through theater. Further, 1209 equipment was given to the Vetted Syrian Opposition and divested from military accountability systems. The transaction required that leaders develop a new process that maintained visibility on end-users while simultaneously releasing equipment to their partners. The process received consistent checks to guarantee accurate accounting, and SOF elements answered countless Congressional and DoD inquiries into the amount, type and recipients of 1209 equipment.

While management of 1209 equipment was critical to mission success, SOF teams also needed routine logistical support to operate in Syria. Each LOGNODE maintained the capability to receive, store and distribute 1209 equipment, but also executed sustainment in the maintenance, supply and field services disciplines. SOF support Soldiers established the critical link between airfields and supported SOF teams. Each LOGNODE was fielded with the requisite personnel to execute aircraft download, operate a central receiving and shipping point and conduct ground distribution or aerial delivery of materiel from the airfield to SOF teams operating in remote locations. Further, each LOGNODE conducted maintenance on all vehicles, weapons and generators, and provided vehicle recovery for battle-damaged or non-mission capable platforms. While the LOGNODE teams were manned with a relatively small number of Soldiers, they were versatile enough to execute tasks often reserved for support battalions and brigades.

**IN TOTAL, THE CAN RECEIVED MORE THAN 500 TRUCKLOADS OF EQUIPMENT FROM VENDORS ACROSS THE UNITED STATES, AND IT ACCOUNTED FOR MORE THAN $400 MILLION IN EQUIPMENT EARMARKED FOR SYRIAN PARTNER FORCES.**

## MATERIAL SOLUTIONS TO UNFORESEEN CHALLENGES

SOF teams prepare to operate in any environment, but battlefield dynamics cannot always be predicted, and often materiel solutions are necessary to overcome challenges. Equipping Special Operations Forces requires flexibility and depth in order to be effective. SOF support elements must be well-versed in the equipping process to deliver required resources and thus capabilities to the battlefield rapidly. There exists a multitude of methods for procuring equipment and services in support of SOF elements. The three primary methods through which to enable the equipping of SOF operating in support of overseas missions include: operational fund purchases, contingency contracting, and requesting materiel through an Operational Deficiency Report. Each method is effective, but SOF support elements must know which to leverage based on the requirement, location, and operational tempo.

If an in-theater solution was available to source an emerging SOF requirement, a Type I or Type II OPFUND would be used as a procurement capability to meet that requirement. OPFUNDs not only provided for the rapid acquisition of mission critical material and services, but also allowed our Soldiers to leverage and engage the local populace by bolstering the local economy and gaining credibility by investing dollars into the local area. The OPFUND program supporting both Type I and Type II funds, was managed by a myriad of pay agents, field ordering officers, contracting officers and regional disbursing agents to execute and fulfill requirements.

Type I OPFUNDs support only USG requirements and provide rapid material and service solutions under a $30k threshold and temporary services under 30 days. Typical Type I purchases included septic tanks, air conditioners, generators and repair parts, lumber, fuel drums, washing machines, hot water heaters, gravel, linguist services and plumbing materials and labor. Type I OPFUNDs were invaluable for resourcing basic life support items in austere environments where contracts were infeasible or too slow to keep pace with the operational tempo.

Type II OPFUNDs supported partner forces and met operational requirements in a similar manner to Type

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I OPFUND requests. Type II OPFUND authorizations included durable goods, repair and construction parts, food, fuel and water, sanitation and preventive medicine purchases. These funds had an immeasurable impact on working relationships and the cohesion between U.S. and partner forces. Most notably, Type II OPFUND was pivotal in the task to provide food for our partner forces as the local staples of beans, rice and oils were readily available on the local economy.

Separately, contingency contracting was used for in-theater solutions that do not meet the OPFUND criteria in order to provide essential services and immediate capability for SOF personnel. The primary conduit for contracting support was the Operational Contracting Support Integration Cell within the SOF headquarters, which funneled contract requirements through one of three contracting cells to validate, fund and award contracts in support of SOF elements. All contract requirements compete through the Joint Requirements Review Board, a panel comprised of staffers from the J3, J4, Engineer and JAG sections. Once a requirement is validated, it is forwarded to the appropriate contracting organizations for a contracting officer to solicit bids. SOF elements leveraged contingency contracting in select locations for billeting, food services, construction and limited transportation.

Finally, for solutions that cannot be met immediately in-theater, an element can complete the Operational Deficiency Report. The ODR begins with a well-defined and specific operational shortfall that can be met with an existing material solution. The requesting unit must clearly articulate what the requirement is, the desired capability, an operational justification, impact to the mission if not funded, required delivery date and cost. The ODRs for Syria T&E were processed through the SOF headquarters for validation and then forwarded to the appropriate headquarters for resourcing. Specifically, SOF peculiar equipment requests went to the Theater Special Operations Command a Combat Mission Needs Statement was developed, and service component common equipment requests went to the conventional force as an Operational Needs Statement. The ODR was crucial when filling gaps in mobility platforms, but SOF logisticians must understand the process and timeline from request to receipt of equipment.

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**Type I and II OPFUND earmarked for CLI sustainment of VSO partners, and basic life support requirements for SOF teams.**

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**Parts purchased with Type I OPFUND were used to create a black-water removal system. This system was employed at a SOF operating site in Syria.**

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## FIELDING THE TEAM

The challenges with sustaining Syria's T&E mission made it apparent that SOF logisticians needed to develop a structured system to manage personnel requirements. In order to prepare for sustainment operations, enablers borrowed an existing Joint SOF community model known as the Joint Operational Readiness Training System. The purpose of JORTS was to ensure sustainers and maintainers could provide support to the forward command and be well postured to continue home-station requirements.

As the complexity of the sustainment mission increased, the JORTS system required a more refined process. SOF logisticians developed a Green Cycle Pre-Mission Training program consisting of three phases to address evolving needs and prepare enablers for utilization across the CENTCOM AOR: Phase I-Individual-Level Training; Phase II- Collective-Level Training; Phase III-Individual Readiness and Deployment. The LOGNODE formed for each cycle completed this training program, comprised of Soldiers from across the unit, in order to create the most diverse and exhaustive skillset possible.

The first phase of PMT focused on baseline individual and MOS-specific skills that created the foundation for further specified skills development and collective training to occur in Phase II. During this phase, LOGNODE members remained in their organic formations while executing training tailored toward proficiency in their overseas mission. Such training included baseline com-

petencies in the enabler's MOS and, in some cases, the completion of ATRRS-related certifications.

Additionally, training with civilian contract partners was critical to sustain individual and MOS-specific skills. Given the ever-growing complexity of sustainment operations across the CENTCOM AOR, coupled with the significant manpower costs associated with manning the sustainment enterprise, the employment of contract maintainers became vitally important to ensure technical proficiency. Training alongside civilian contract partners helped develop skills and bolster partnerships across the sustainment enterprise.

The second phase of PMT consisted of collective training with a tactical focus for the deploying LOGNODE. Soldiers engaged in training geared towards Soldier survivability and tactical proficiency. During the second phase, Soldiers were task-organized into their LOGNODE roles to develop unit cohesion and team dynamics. Phase II covered a wide berth of collective tasks supported by both organic and contracted assets. Training events included tactical and non-tactical vehicle driving, vehicle recovery, convoy procedures, convoy live fire exercises, counter-IED operations, and Tactical Combat Casualty Care. The culminating event of Phase II was a four-day certification exercise. During the first three days of the CERTEX, the LOGNODE conducted Mission Command of sustainment operations from a fixed LOGNODE. Additionally, the LOGNODE managed 1209 stock warehousing and distribution, and conducted long-haul LOGPAC missions to dispersed locations. The last day of the CERTEX focused on the execution of a key leader engagement to exercise strategic messaging and an aerial delivery resupply to cross-train non-MOS soldiers on containerized delivery system bundle rigging.

The last phase of PMT ensured each member of the LOGNODE was administratively ready to deploy. The unit programed an extensive Soldier Readiness Program that included the necessary medical tasks, human resources tasks (DD93 and SGLI), and parachute operations to ensure Soldiers were current for pay prior to deployment. This time also allowed LOGNODE leadership to direct any necessary retraining after the CERTEX assessments to guarantee full proficiency before departure. The end state of the PMT program was a cohesive team of well-trained, flexible and adaptive SOF logisticians who were able to think critically and employ a vast array of varying skillsets required by the dynamic operating environment of the CENTCOM AOR. Equally important, Soldiers were medically and administratively ready to deploy.

## CONCLUSION

Unquestionably, the execution of competent and effective sustainment in an unconventional conflict is pivotal to the success of operations. The D-ISIS mission in Syria presented challenges with equipping a new partner force and sustaining operations, providing material solutions to emerging capability gaps and fielding a capable team of SOF logisticians on an enduring basis. These challenges were overcome through critical thinking, innovation and SOF professionals solving problems with limited resources. Most paramount was the trust and confidence SOF leadership afforded SOF logisticians to empower disciplined execution.

The D-ISIS mission in Syria produced lessons that will be valuable for SOF logisticians into the foreseeable future. First, moving at the "speed of SOF" means that we will always outpace existing support infrastructure, policy and funding. It is necessary to plan for these variables as SOF elements will have to fill the void. It is also imperative that SOF Commands understand the processes associated with the validation and procurement of requirements as staffing and fielding take time, and they must be worked into the operational plan. Finally, SOF logisticians must be versatile and prepared to work outside of their MOS, and a structured cross-training program is the only proven method to guarantee success. SW

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Lt. Col. Tavi N. Brunson** is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he was commissioned into the Quartermaster Corps. In his first SOF assignment, he served as the Commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 528th Special Troops Battalion (STB), 528th Sustainment Brigade (SO)(A), with follow-on assignments at the U.S. Army Special Operations Command. He is currently the Commander, Group Support Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne).

**Maj. David Armeson** graduated from Norwich University and commissioned in the United States Army Medical Service Corps. He is the 5th SFF(A) Support Battalion Executive Officer, and performed duties as the J4, Combined Joint Special Operation Task Force – Syria (CJSOTF-S).